

THE TURNTABLE

VOL. 5 NO. 6

RICHMOND, INDIANA

JULY 1969

FROM THE OLD...



TO THE NEW...



SPECIAL EDITION

Editorial Note: These summer months of 1969 mark a significant period of time in the progress, growth, and history of the Mercury Record Mfg. Co. as Mercury employees move from the old manufacturing plant at 300 South 1st Street to new, modern production facilities at 1600 Rich Rd., Richmond, Indiana. This July issue of The Turntable is actually a special edition designed to graphically

record this historical turning point in the continuing development of Mercury Records and of the phonograph record industry in Richmond. You may, therefore, wish to tuck this issue of The Turntable away in your personal files as a "remember when?" item to reminisce over upon some nostalgic or reflective moment in the future. (Assistant Editor).

PAST AND PROLOGUE

As Mercury employees make their fond farewells to the old plant and, perhaps, reflect on past experiences encountered there we pause to review the interesting history of phonograph record making that took place in these aged quarters for over half a century. The following historical account was condensed from an article titled "Those fabulous Gennetts", written by George W. Kay, which appeared in the June 1953 issue of "The Record Changer", a magazine no longer published.



A familiar scene to Mercury employees for many years - entrance to the old plant.

When they recorded jazz in a shack

In 1872 James Starr founded the Starr Piano Company in Richmond, Indiana. This was the first piano company west of the Alleghanies. Starr decided to enter the recording field in 1915, and to this end purchased obsolete recording equipment and old masters from a bankrupt company in Boston.

The early records he issued were under the green-and-white "Starr" label, but for policy reasons it was decided in 1918 to change the name into "Gennett" after one of the directors of the company, Fred Gennett.

Gennett records were being made by the lateral cut process when, in 1918, Victor brought a suit against Starr for patent infringement. After a long battle in court, where for the first time in history moving pictures (explaining the process of making lateral cut records) were accepted as evidence, the Supreme Court, in 1921, handed down a decision in favor of Starr. This caused much jubilation among Starr's supporters: Okeh, Vocalion and Compos who fought shoulder to shoulder with Gennett in their struggle for survival against the giant competitors Victor and Columbia.

Following the breaking of the Victor patent, all companies, including Starr's guarded their methods with the utmost secrecy. Only the most trusted employees were allowed in the studio monitor-room. Horns of various sizes and shapes designed to meet the requirements of particular instruments or voices were fitted into a three-pronged pipe. The sound vibrations were transmitted through the labyrinth of plumbing to the cutting stylus, and into the grooves of the master. Gennett engineers relied on powdered graphite brushed into the groove to facilitate the cutting line of the stylus. This crude method often caused rough spots in the copper plating and for that reason many masters were thrown on the scrap heap.

Imperfections were removed by an expert craftsman by means of dentist's chisels. This operator became so skilled in his craft that the joke has it that a voice passage could be changed from "yes" to "no" by a well-timed flick of the chisel-blade.

The stylus was a constant source of concern. Gennett technicians experimented with glass, mica, tin, diamonds and sapphires until they finally wound up with an 87 degree angle 0.0025 to 0.003 radius on point sapphire cutting stylus in 1926.

The machinery activating the turntable was a throwback to the dark ages. A heavy weight was raised in a shaft by a cable and pulley arrangement similar to the grandfather-clock principle. The cable was wound around the centre pin of the turntable and, as the weight lowered itself, the turntable used to spin.

The Gennett studios, poorly ventilated at best, were often left unheated overnight, causing the gear grease to become stiff and heavy. It was not unusual for recording sessions to be delayed several hours, while the engineers heated the bearings.

All this considerably affected the speed of rotation which often varied between 75 and 85 rpm. But in those days of acoustical recording and spring driven phonographs, no one really cared, and so the antique equipment remained in use many years after Gennett adopted electrical recording techniques, this trend being set by the pioneering work of the R.C.A. company.

In 1919, top year in sales for the Starr Piano Company, the figures soared to 15,000 pianos, 35,000 spring driven phonographs and 3,000,000 records. The Gennett catalogue was expanded considerably in both the classical and in the popular field, but it was not until spring 1923 that Gennett entered the jazz era.

On March 12, a band by the name of New Orleans Rhythm Kings came to make eight sides. Two weeks later Paul Mares and Leon Rapollo, N.O.R.K.'s trumpeter and clarinettist returned to cut four tunes as the Original Memphis Melody Boys. The same day (March 31, 1923) Gennett made itself indispensable in jazz-history by recording King Oliver's famous Creole Jazz Band. Oliver

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returned a week later to record four more tunes and to sign a contract.

July 17 and 18, 1923 are also historic dates in jazz annals for the incomparable Jelly Roll Morton appeared in the Gennett Studio to record singly and to join forces with the New Orleans Rhythm Kings.

On October 5, King Oliver terminated relations with Gennett by making 8 more sides which had exceedingly limited release. The extreme rarity of "Zulu's ball" and "Working man's blues" has proved this. On February 6, 1924, Fred Wiggins, Gennett's A & R man had another stroke of genius by recording Bix Beiderbecke and the Wolverines, who appeared for a series of dance engagements at the nearby Indiana University.

Following the N.O.R.K. success, recordings were made by the Bucktown Five, featuring Muggsy Spanier and Volly de Vaut and on June 9th, 1924, the great Jelly Roll Morton pounded out eleven piano solos, all classics in ragtime, blues and stombs. Gennett's New York studio was also busy, where in November and December 1924 Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet and Buster Bailey waxed the now-famous sides of the Red Onion Jazz Babies.

Although Gennett released a rather extensive array of all types of music, sales decreased. Notwithstanding the fact that electrically recorded disks were issued on the new Electrobeam label the fortune of over \$7,000,000 amassed by Henry Gennett back in 1919 gradually frittered away after 1926.

One reason why Gennett lasted so long in the record business was because he avoided paying large sums to artists. This actually served to open the studio doors to less prominent jazz bands, obscure blues singers and Negro spiritual groups. Many of them have since become famous to collectors.

The Gennett "Race Series" drew hundreds of Negro blues singers and pick-up outfits from the Chicago area to make the records which are now-a-days preciously guarded treasures of a record collection. People like Georgia Tom, Scrapper Blackwell, Sam Collins, Alberta Jones and the State Street Ramblers dropped in to earn a few dollars on a record.

The depression finally dealt a staggering blow to the Gennett activities. Withdrawing the Electrobeam label, Starr concentrated solely on the Champion and Superior names to

supply records selling three-for-a-dollar in chain stores, limited though the market may have been.



Faded signs painted on walls of the old plant remain as reminders of the Gennett Records era. Almost illegible are two song titles which must have been hit recordings of that time: "Danube Waves" and "Southern Roses".

There were unbelievably small shipments of Champions for the final year of 1934: a Georgia Tom coupling (Levee bound blues, Gee but it's hard) managed to reach 160 copies shipped. Starr sold the Champion trade mark to Decca on June 28, 1935, thus terminating activity in the studio recording field.

The year 1952 brought to an end the association of the Gennett family with the Starr Piano Company. Starr's equipment was sold to Decca, including 20 hydraulic and 30 toggle record presses still in working order. High on the walls of the drab red-brick structures appear the letters "Starr Piano Company--Makers of Grand, Upright and Player Pianos."

Mercury continues record making history in Richmond

Decca had closed its doors in 1948 leaving all of its machinery installed in the old plant. In 1950 Decca's Richmond operations were resumed and were continued until the fall of 1957. The last of their supervisors, engaged in the final shutdown of operations, worked until December 1957.

Henry Fine, owner of National Re-

cord Pressings, had begun hiring Decca's former employees in order to obtain experienced personnel with record pressing know-how for his business. In early 1958 National Record Pressings bought out Decca and by May of that year the familiar noises of phonograph record production were once again resounding from the walls of the old plant. From modest beginnings (the first production came from only four presses), "Hank" Fine built his business substantially so that by 1961 he was operating one of the larger record manufacturing plants in the industry.

In September of 1961, National Record Pressings was purchased by Consolidated Electronics Industries Corporation, which established business under two firm names, Richmond Record Pressing and Wayne Printing. It was not until 1966 that these two companies were merged to form the Mercury Record Manufacturing Company.

A surprising number of employees now with Mercury have worked in the old plant since the days of Decca and Starr Piano. Those who have seen the phonograph record industry grow here these many years are as follows:

Millie Allen
Rance Allen
Tron Bailey
Flossie Barker
Ivan Bolinger
Dora Bowling
Everett Burns
James Butt
Dorothy Chasteen
James Delong
Ed Estridge
Lucille Fister
Jack Henderson
Anna Issacs
Geneva Jones
Edna Karns
Marie Roszell
Daisy Smith
Mary Smith
Luther Sparks
Anna Tuttle
Sam Tuttle
Margaret Wilmoth
Mattie Wilson

(Inasmuch as our personnel records are incomplete as to employment prior to the establishment of Mercury Records, the above list of names may not be complete. We apologize to anyone whose name may have been unavoidably omitted from this list. - Ass't Ed.)

PICTORIAL REPORT ON PRODUCTION BEGINNINGS IN NEW MERCURY FACILITIES

The photos shown below illustrate Mercury manufacturing "firsts" in the new plant. As the first production items come off the lines in each department, they mark the beginning of

a bright, new era of phonograph record making in the history of Mercury Records and of Richmond, Indiana.



Perhaps one of the most welcomed "firsts" in the new plant for Mercury employees was the opening of the modern, air-conditioned, cafeteria pictured above. A considerable amount of time went into planning a comfortable and convenient dining facility to meet the needs of all employees. The attractive surroundings of the cafeteria are readily accessible to all employees at lunch and break periods - it is within approximately three minutes walking time from any department in the plant. A short-order grill and electronic oven to heat machine-vended sandwiches are innovations added to make lunch-time a more pleasant experience for all personnel. Those who bring their lunch may also use the electronic oven provided they remove any metal foil, which damages the machine, prior to heating sandwiches. At present, Mercury management is making a study to determine the best possible schedule of lunch periods so that all are easily accommodated, and to find ways of making the cafeteria into a rest and recreation area, as well as a dining facility.



On June 20 the first chipboard album jacket was produced on the folder-gluer machine shown above; from left are: Charles Collins, material handler; Anna Tuttle, off-bearer; and Charlie Beckman, machine operator.



Larry Loper, ASM set up man, inspects first 7 inch records produced in the new plant on July 3. The first single pressed was Moms Mabley's latest record, "Abraham, Martin, and John", released on the Mercury label.



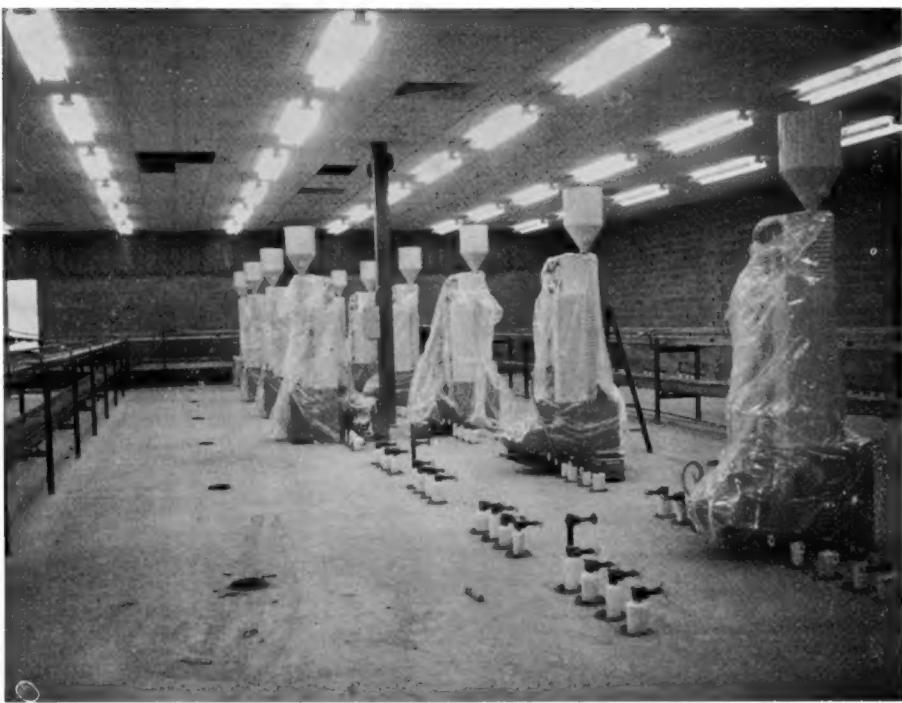
The first album jacket was fabricated on July 3 bearing the Philips label and title, "Le Voyage en Ballon". Tending this first run of production on the album fabricating machine, from front to rear in the above photo, are: Anna Tuttle, General Foreman Harold Williams, Foreman Keith Gabbard, and Art Cross.



A Norelco magazine insert and mailer advertising the Norelco line of electric shavers for both men and women was the first job order completed by the Printing Department in the new facilities. On June 26, this elaborate display rolled off the Heidelberg Rotospeed two-color press shown above; from left are pressmen Jim Hughes and John Puckett.



The Camera Department completed its first job order in the new plant on June 3; Jerry Fourman (above left), journeyman stripper and Jerry Heckler, (above right), plate maker, performed the stripping and plate making on a new Leslie Gore double album bearing the Mercury Wing label.



The Compression Department at this time is not yet in operation in the new plant and will not produce its first 12 inch record until sometime later this summer. Pictured above are new extruders being installed and readied for the time when the presses can be moved from the old plant.



On July 7, Julia McFarland (shown above) became the first Audio tester to test recordings in Quality Control's new facilities.



The first shipments to customers departed Shipping's docks at the new plant on May 19 via Company trucks for connections at Dayton, Ohio, air and truck terminals. Shown above, from left, are: Rance Allen, truck driver, and J. R. Whitehead, hi-lift operator.